



SILICON VALLEY FILM FUND

First-time movie actress Sally Andrews stars in "Her Majesty," a film about a girl in 1950s New Zealand who dreams of meeting Queen Elizabeth.

DREAM MOVIE

PENINSULA MOMS' HARD WORK BRINGS SWEET STORY TO SCREEN

By Glenn Lovell

Mercury News

"Her Majesty," a charming little family movie about a New Zealand girl's overwhelming desire to meet Queen Elizabeth, took 16 years and the determined efforts of two Peninsula women to make it to the big screen.

How it got made is as amazing as the heart-tugging story of the 12-year-old girl and the visiting monarch.

Like "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" and "Bend It Like

Beckham," which defied the odds to become word-of-mouth family hits, "Her Majesty" (opening in San Jose and throughout the Bay Area on Friday) is that rare PG-rated production financed outside the studio system by private investors, some of them Bay Area parents and grandparents.

Lisa Gordon of Palo Alto and Susan Hailey of Atherton led the charge. After anteing up themselves, they talked 32 people into investing \$25,000 to \$100,000. In six months they had raised \$2.5 million, the amount needed for writer-director Mark Gordon, Lisa's



MARCIE KAY

Peninsula residents Lisa Gordon, left, and Susan Hailey worked tirelessly to raise funds for the filming of "Her Majesty," written and directed by Gordon's brother Mark.

mercurynews.com

To link to the Web site for "Her Majesty."

See MOVIE, Page 4E

MOVIE | Moms' hard work gets sweet tale on screen

Continued from Page 1E

brother, to fly to New Zealand to scout locations, hire a crew and complete the five-week shoot.

"We had no idea how hard it would be to raise the money," says Lisa Gordon, an attorney who has worked in corporate marketing. "We pretty much broke every one of Hollywood's golden rules: No stars ... no studio money ... no distributor ... and a first-time writer-director."

The film's budget was raised by Lisa Gordon and Hailey in informal "pitch sessions" in Boston, Seattle, Mountain View and Atherton. Their presentations included wine and cheese (from Down Under, of course) and a newsreel of Queen Elizabeth's 1953 visit to New Zealand. Mark Gordon walked prospective investors through the plot, which he described as a sophisticated coming-of-age story for children and "adults with the hearts of children."

But it was Hailey and Lisa Gordon — described as "very social and very well connected" by Mark Gordon — who got the ball rolling financially after so many disappointments.

The "Her Majesty" script was written in 1988 and then, a year later, accepted into the writers' workshop at Robert Redford's Sundance Institute. Thanks to this exposure, it was quickly optioned by a Hollywood production company.



Writer-director Mark Gordon looks through one of the awards he has won for his film "Her Majesty."

Over the next decade, it was discussed as a vehicle for Reese Witherspoon, Anna Paquin and, to the director's dismay, Angela Lansbury, suggested for the role of the Maori "witch" who imparts life lessons.

But then, silence. "People are used to seeing family films from Disney or DreamWorks," says Mark Gordon, 43, who attended high

school in Mountain View before studying film at UCLA. "But this was different, a family-friendly film being developed outside the studio system. No one could figure out how to make it happen."

No one until Hailey and Lisa Gordon, who describe themselves as "movie moms" who take their children to weekend matinees but are generally depressed by what they see. For

Lisa Gordon, the "turning point" came at "Pokémon: The First Movie"; Hailey threw up her hands at "The Rugrats Movie."

"It wasn't even funny — just a bunch of animated characters yelling at each other," recalls Hailey, 48, an executive with Harrah's Entertainment. "I was shocked that I even took my 6-year-old daughter to see it. I said to myself, 'There's

got to be something better than this.'"

That "something" turned out to be the Cinderella fable about a girl and a queen, both named Elizabeth. It appealed to business associates and family friends as an alternative to crass, effects-heavy Hollywood fare. For their contributions, investors were told they would receive an on-screen thank-you, the opportunity to appear as an extra in a crowd scene (after they paid their own way to New Zealand), and assurance that they would be reimbursed after the film's exhibitors and New Jersey distributor were paid.

With the \$2.5 million in the bank, the team cast about for an experienced producer who could put together a shooting schedule, hire a crew — and bring added legitimacy to the production. Walter Coblenz, veteran producer of "All the President's Men" and "The Onion Field," applied for the job, and with him came cinematographer Stephen M. Katz and editor Virginia Katz (no relation), who had worked on "Gods and Monsters."

After casting calls in Auckland and Wellington, the role of Elizabeth went to 11-year-old Sally Andrews, who had never acted in a movie.

The film, completed in May 2001, was entered in film festivals in Chicago and Indianapolis, where it won awards. Last spring, it received limited runs in Pittsburgh, Columbus, Scottsdale and Kansas City, where "it came in second to 'Van Helsing' during the opening weekend," says Mark Gordon proudly. Queen Elizabeth has seen the film's trailer, he adds, but there is still no word on whether she has bestowed

a royal thumb up or down.

Still, "the real test" for the film comes now, says Lisa Gordon, "because this is our own back yard." To get the word out about Friday's Bay Area, Chicago and Salt Lake City premieres, Gordon and Hailey are frantically networking via phone, e-mail, online message groups and school assemblies.

"We have a limited budget for publicity, so ours is primarily a grass-roots campaign," says Lisa Gordon, standing in her cluttered home office. "We're trying to create a groundswell of awareness."

Producer Coblenz still can't believe what he calls "the incredible enthusiasm" of the Hollywood outsiders.

"These two women did something quite amazing," he says. "By raising money privately, they made it possible for us to make a film without studio supervision, without anyone looking over our shoulder."

And how do Bay Area investors feel about the finished product?

"We think it's a lovely film," replies Anita Savides of Los Altos Hills, who invested \$25,000 with her husband and son. "We couldn't be prouder of Mark and Lisa, who we've known since childhood."

"We got involved because of the scarcity of quality films for grandma and her grandchildren," adds Karen Druker, a retired caterer in Palo Alto. "Family movies today don't teach lessons about life and respecting yourself. This one does."

Contact Glenn Lovell at (408) 920-5689 or gllovel@mercurynews.com.